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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the mechanism by which the successful learner acquires a second language. The author postulates a core language, the common core of the speaker's native and target languages, and states that the second language becomes an extension of this common core. Whatever language-specific features are added while acquiring the second language are extensions of the common system underlying the two systems. In successful second language learners, latent language structure is linked with latent psychological structure, whereas in the ordinary learner there is a separation between these two structures. The successful language learner achieves a prelinguistic identification that results in successful communication in two codes. The language learner, in seeking genetic equivalence, discovers a deep interlingual identification between native and target language forms. In discussing the grammar-translation method, the situation-structural method, and the notional-rhetorical approach, the latter is seen as primary since it establishes a closer link between the latent psychological and latent language structures. By assuming that function is prior to form and that the whole is prior to the parts, this method facilitates the realization of conceptual and behavioral potentials of language in a properly linked manner. (Author/JK)

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THE CONCEPT OF CORE LANGUAGE AND THE NOTIONAL-RHETORICAL APPROACH TO SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

(K. CHELLAPPAN)

Selinker (1972) made a significant contribution to the theory of second language learning when he postulated the concept of interlanguage as a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's production of a TL norm[1]. He also made a distinction between latent psychological structure and latent language structure (Lenneberg) and claimed that whereas the successful language learner taps the latter which is the biological counterpart to universal grammar and is transformed into the realised structure of a particular grammar in accordance with certain maturational stages, the average second language learners activate only the latent psychological structure whenever they attempt to produce a sentence in the second language. The purpose of this paper is not to question the existence of such a transitional system[2], but to focus the attention on the mechanism of the successful second language learner for which purpose we could postulate the concept of core language. The difference between the concepts of interlanguage and core language could be illustrated diagrammatically:

Figure 1:

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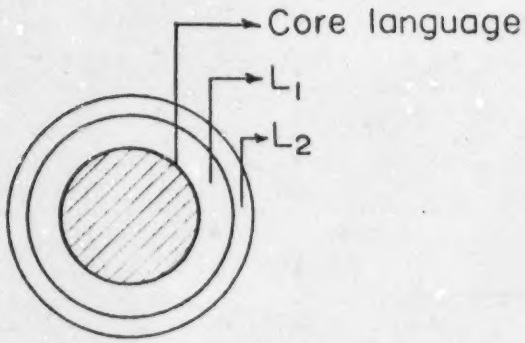

FIGURE - 1.

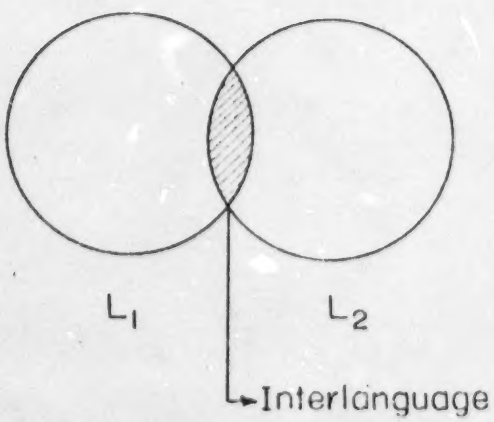

FIGURE - 2.

Figure 2:

Whereas in interlanguage we see a simple overlapping of two systems, core language is the common core of the two languages, and L_2 becomes an extension of the common core and whatever language - specific features are added while acquiring L_2, they are systemic in the sense that they are extensions of the common system underlying the two systems.

Though Selinker's interlanguage postulates a new system which seems to be superimposed upon the learner's old system in his attempt to acquire the new system, he does not seem to give importance to the possibility of a synthesis between the two and to the fact that this synthesis could evolve from an interlingual identification of a deeper kind. The latent psychological structure from which he derives the interlanguage seems to be a mere inhibiting faculty and he does not say why this is activated in most of the second language learners. Perhaps we could say that in successful second language learners, the latent language structure is linked with the latent psychological structure, whereas there is a divorce between the two in the

(.. 3)

ordinary learner and we could also relate this divorce to the structural drill method which delinks second language learning from the conceptual processes by giving emphasis to the habit formation.

Interlanguage could therefore be distinguished from a core language which could include Lenneberg's latent language structure and Selinker's latent psychological structure. This core language when it is realised will have different manifestations in different speakers; the perfect successful second language learner somehow achieves this prelinguistic identification and this results in successful communication through two codes. According to Swain (1971 Page 6.) also, "More efficient would be a common core of rules with those specific to a particular language tagged to a particular code, as such through a process of differentiation"[3]. Wyatt (1971) has also discussed how deep structure can be formulated in a common core transformational grammar.[4] Though we pursue a similar line of thought, our emphasis is on the prelingual level synthesis of cognitive and linguistic structures.

An ordinary second language learner is always seeking formal equivalence, i.e. he is satisfied with using the form in L_2 similar to the form in L_1 doing a similar function. There is also the other extreme, again a bad learner, who simply reduces the utterance in L_2 to 'the semantics' of his mother

(.. 4)

tongue and then 'clothes' it in the forms of the new medium. But the successful second language learner discovers a deeper interlingual identification, and to him second language learning is not just matching new forms to old meanings. If at all there is any translation (and we cannot rule it out in the best of the second language learner) several stages are now simply skipped and the branching off takes place as it were at the core level. To put it differently the successful second language learner seeks genetic equivalence, not simply formal or semantic equivalence.

It is interesting to note that similar errors are made by second language learners with different mother tongues. For example, the construction "I have seen him yesterday" can be found both in the French speakers of English and the Tamil speakers of English. We also see significant similarities in the relativisation processes of Taglog and Tamil, and even though the surface structures of the relative clause in English and Tamil differ, there is a common core at the deepest level and the good second language learner starts with it, whereas the ordinary learner has to pass through several stages before he achieves the correct English pattern, and more often than not, he does not reach it at all.

(.. 5)

The relationship between the concept of core language postulated here and the theory of linguistic universals is obvious; but we would relate it to the structure of the mind rather than language, or at least this is parallel to that; and we would add that the latent language structure of Lenneberg and the latent psychological structure of Selinker are tapped simultaneously in a successful second language learner: or to put it differently when the core language is tapped, there is no dichotomy between cognitive and linguistic structures, between meaning and form. Another possibility is that the core language subsumes both the structures, and only after further investigation we can state categorically whether there are two structures acting simultaneously, or there is a synthesis of both; but we have reasons to postulate that the deeper interlingual identification takes place at a prelinguistic stage, where language and behaviour or form and meaning are indistinguishably interwoven. We have a basis for this in the recent developments in the theories of semantics - sensitive transformational grammar, particularly in the version of Lakoff which claims that there is almost an exact correspondence between the more basic syntactic categories and the primitive terms of symbolic logic and between the rules which he and Ross have proposed as base component universals and the formation rules for symbolic logic which various authors have proposed.[5]

The most advanced successful second language learners even become great writers in that medium and even if there is 'reduction'

in their language there is no 'distortion'. To give one or two examples, we see in R.K. Narayan's English, the realisation of a kind of core language - which is a result of a deeper interlingual identification, or a synthesis of whatever is compatible between the two systems. Whatever translation there is, it takes place at the prelinguistic level. The case of Raja Rao is a slightly different version of the same situation. The hybrid language in which Kannada experience is brought through the English medium could still be within English provided the identification takes place at the core level and we have reasons to believe that he also achieves that identification.

Coming to the less advanced level of second language learners with whom we are concerned, we may say that in the more successful learners the dichotomy between form and meaning, linguistic structure and cognitive structure and between L_1 and L_2 is resolved, of course, in different degrees. And our assumption is that the notional - rhetorical approach could help us achieve this aim more systematically. What is done naturally in the first language situation, has now to be done deliberately.

The grammar-translation method gave priority to meaning, and the structural method gave priority to form, but in both cases there was divorce between linguistic structures and vitalising conceptual sources. The grammar-translation method made the learner acquire not language behaviour

(.. 7)

in relation to experience, but understanding of notions in L_2 as equivalents of L_1 (see the scheme below). Instead of exploring experience and generating semantic - syntactic patterns through L_2, the students acquired only new forms for meanings already known to them. Conversely through the structural method the semantico - grammatical categories were established as habits and again there was no vital link between linguistic and conceptual structures. The students were deterred from acquiring second language as meaningful behaviour. In L_1 language habits are automatic but meaningful, in L_2 acquired as habit formation they are automatic but not meaningful.

But by presenting language through notional-rhetorical method, we could establish a closer link between the latent psychological and latent language structures. By assuming that function is prior to form and that the whole is prior to the parts the notional-rhetorical approach facilitates realisation of conceptual and behavioural potentials of language in a properly linked manner from the beginning. This does not mean that formal categories are not taught now, but they are subordinated to, or seen as parts of, functional categories for which for want of a better term, we have given the term 'notions'. The relative merits of the three approaches may be schematically represented as following:[6]

(.. 8)

Grammar-Translation Method	Situation-Structural Method	Notional-Rhetorical approach
Notional Grammar + lexis	Structure + situation	Semantico-grammatical categories and functional categories
through Translation	through Drill	through Communication
acquisition of lexical equivalents and notional grammar	acquisition of habits in clash with their conceptual skills	Conceptual skills realised as rhetorical features
Meaning equivalents which is Meaning without behaviour	'Structure' which is Habit without meaning	'Language as Communication' which is Meaningful behaviour

(.. 9)

As we could see in the above scheme, the facts of language and skills are there in all the three, but there is difference in the kind of relationship between them. If the first two approaches by segmenting form and meaning and L_1 and L_2 habits, resulted in creating interlanguage, the third approach by synthesising them leads to the tapping of core language.

It is easier to establish a link between language as function, meaning and rhetoric, and behaviour than to start from lexis (grammar-translation method) or structure (structural method) and to proceed to language behaviour. This again could be illustrated diagrammatically:

Figure 3:

(.. 10)

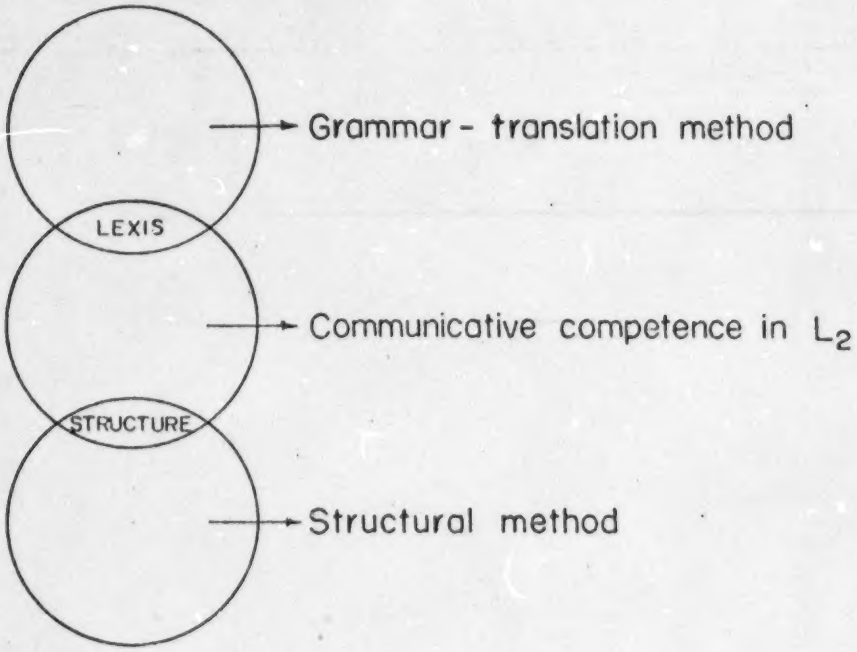

FIGURE - 3

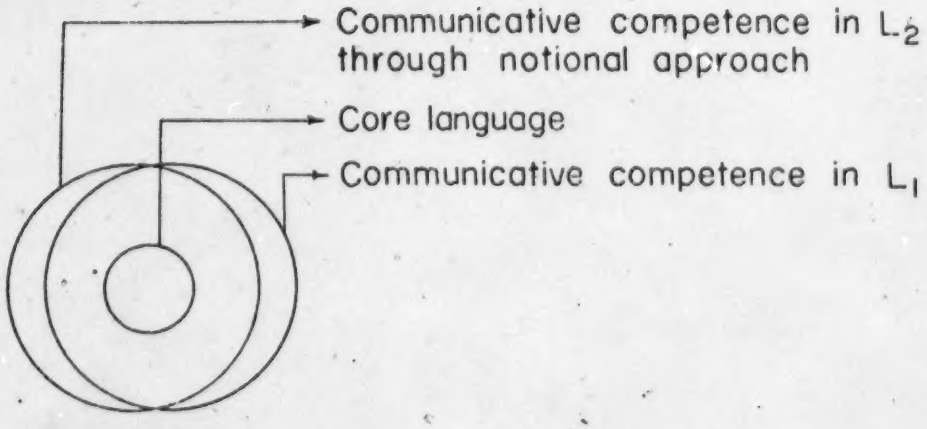

FIGURE - 4

Figure 4:

Whereas the first two methods only touch the fringe of communicative competence, though through opposite directions the notional-rhetorical approach by achieving a closest proximity to the learning processes of L_1 by tapping the core language, and bringing language learning closer to conceptual processes covers a wider area of communicative competence in L_2. It may however be noted that even though other methods one can reach the core language the process is long, but the process is long and circutous and only very few can reach that point.

The synthesis between language structure and psychological structure can be brought out only by subordinating grammar to rhetoric, parts to the whole and also by synthesising semantics and grammar in a more dynamic way and at a deeper level than it is being done now. The semantico-grammatical categories should be subordinated to communicative-functional categories or they can also be taught from the communicative point of view.

(.. 11)

Exercises should direct them to perform illocutionary acts in which language is used naturally.

The emphasis on notions and rhetoric could naturally make the student get into the inner core of language which is not culture-bound, and language-specific features could be the superstructure built on that base. Notions such as agreement and persuasion will have more variables than notions such as time and measurement. And this could possibly encourage us to give more importance to scientific discourse. Even when there are variables, it is possible to establish certain processes which are universal. This very limitation can be exploited for teaching purposes, because the students can be asked to give the variables for the basic framework (which would be a different kind of substitution table in the discourse level) and the comparison of the different realisations and their internal structures could reveal a lot to the students. The argument that through scientific texts it is easy to tap the core language does not invalidate the use of the novel for a similar purpose through fast reading.[7] At present, reading in L_2 is ineffective because whereas in the first language, words serve as mediators between the conceptual order in the text and the cognitive processes of the learner, in the second language situation the whole process is deliberate, and the more conscious the effort to grapple

(.. 12)

with the signs, the more ineffective the grasp of content becomes. Hence, the tendency to proceed from letters to sounds and then from individual sounds to words and then from words to sentences and then to larger structures should be reversed at each stage.

By giving priority to oral skills at the lowest level, the obsession with graphemes and the mechanism of language could be eliminated. At the advanced level, the basic units of the novel-universe must be established first through the rhetorical features. By making the students participate in the novel through its rhetoric, we can make them come closer to its inner life and also experience language as its life-principle rather than a simple medium. By this process several stages between scanning the graphemes and seeing the over-all pattern could be skipped, or could be made part of synthetic process in which the whole is prior to the parts, and the linguistic structures are linked with and subordinated to the conceptual structures and the form is inseparable from meaning.

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Notes:

1. Larry Selinker, 'Interlanguage' (1972, LRAL Vol x/3) rpt. in Jack Richards (ed.)

   Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition (Longman; 1974) pp. 31-54.

2. Carl James, 'The exculpation of Contrastive Linguistics' in Gerhard Vickel (ed.), Papers in Contrastive Linguistics (Cambridge; 1971) pp. 55-68.

3. M. Swain, 'Bilingualism, Monolingualism and Code acquisition' Paper presented at the Child Language Conference, Chicago, 1971.

4. James L. Wyatt, 'Deep Structure in a contrastive transformational grammar', in Papers in Contrastive Linguistics pp. 75-82.

5. George Lakoff and John Robert Ross, 'Is Deep Structure Necessary?' (Cambridge, Mass; 1971).

6. This scheme was first, though tentatively formulated by the present writer in the paper, 'Communicative competence and linguistic interference', Seminar on Teaching English as Communication, March, 1979, RIE, Bangalore.

7. Compare, Louis Trimble, 'A rhetorical approach to reading Scientific and Technical English', Forum (October, 1979).

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